

Putnam Manufacturing Company Workers' Houses
305-317 Church Street
Putnam
Windham County
Connecticut

HABS No. CT-361

HABS
CONN,
8-PUT,
1-

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
MID-ATLANTIC REGION, NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
PHILADELPHIA, PENNSYLVANIA 19106

HABS
CONN.
8-PUT,
1-

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

PUTNAM MANUFACTURING COMPANY WORKERS' HOUSES

HABS No. CT-361

Location: 305, 313, and 317 Church Street
Putnam, Windham County, Connecticut

USGS Putnam Quadrangle, Universal Transverse
Mercator Coordinates:

305 Church Street: 19.258820.4645240
313 Church Street: 19.258820.4645260
317 Church Street: 19.258820.4645270

Present Owner: Church Street Associates Limited Partnership
110 Mountain Road
Suffield, Connecticut 06078

Present Occupant: Multiple occupants, presently being relocated

Present Use: Partly vacant, partly apartments; about to be
demolished

Significance: The three dwellings are typical examples of mill-
worker housing and were associated with a locally
important manufacturing concern. The houses
represent two building episodes: 305 Church Street
is a small post-and-beam framed house probably built
around 1847; it includes the simple Greek Revival
details, such as corner pilasters and an entablature
at the eaves, common in the period. The other two
houses are plainer, stick-framed structures built
about 1865. All share the gable-roofed form, clap-
boarded exteriors, symmetrical facades, and multiple
entries characteristic of detached New England tex-
tile mill housing.

Putnam Manufacturing Company was one of several
medium-sized textile firms which collectively formed
the economic lifeblood of Putnam, Connecticut. With
power from the Quinebaug River and labor from French
Canadian immigrants, these companies transformed the
area from a nameless locale in 1800 to Windham
County's second largest city in 1920. Putnam
Manufacturing was an integrated textile company
making cotton sheetings and later, lawns and
sateens. It was active from 1865 to 1925 and
employed about 250 people at its height.

I. DESCRIPTIVE INFORMATION

The three houses at 305, 313, and 317 Church Street in Putnam, Connecticut, were all formerly worker tenements associated with a textile mill which stood on the west bank of the Quinebaug River just east of the houses. The neighborhood is mostly residential, with some small businesses on some of the ground floors. The other houses in this area appear to be mostly late 19th-century in origin; though simple vernacular wood-frame structures, they are not on sites formerly owned by a textile company.

The three houses are ranged in a row and all have gable roofs, clapboarded exteriors, brick chimneys, and old six-over-six sash. They are not identical. The southernmost, 305 Church Street, is 1 1/2 stories in height, of post-and-beam construction, and has simple Greek Revival corner pilasters and cornice detailing. The middle tenement, 313 Church Street, is larger and is two stories with a shallow-pitched roof; it does not appear to have a post-and-beam structure, and it has no stylistic detailing. The northernmost, 317 Church Street, is larger still and has rooms in the attic story lighted by three shed-roofed dormers. Its living units have the same plan as its neighbor to the south, and 313 and 317 are essentially two sizes of the same tenement. Because of the slope of the land, both have an extra story at the rear, accomodating basement apartments. The houses were formerly connected by frame infills, probably privies.

The houses were formerly part of a cluster of buildings surrounding the mill. Several other similar houses stood on Ballou Street, which runs east from Church Street south of the houses and then curves around to the north, forming a street parallel to Church Street. These were all demolished in the 1970s when a housing development was built on the site. The mill itself was destroyed in the Flood of 1955; only the dam, some raceways, and a stone storage building survive. Other buildings connected with the site include the former company store, still standing on Providence Street, a Greek Revival-period millowner's house just north of the three tenements, now greatly altered as an apartment house, and north of that, a relatively intact Second Empire-style agent's house from the mill's Victorian period.

II. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

Putnam was the site of Connecticut's first cotton mill, built in 1807 by Rhode Islanders Smith Wilkinson and James Rhodes. Putnam then was simply a part of the town of Pomfret, which like most eastern Connecticut towns relied on agriculture as its economic base. Others soon joined in exploiting the waterpower of the Quinebaug River for cotton manufacture, building dams and mills at successively upstream locations from Wilkinson and Rhodes' mill. Around each of the mills small villages grew, with workers' tenements, boardinghouses, and company stores.

The first part of the mill associated with these houses was started in 1846 and opened in 1848 by Hosea Ballou of Woonsocket, Rhode Island. At first partners with his brothers, George C. and Dexter Ballou, in 1828 he struck out on his own. In 1846 he sold his Rhode Island holdings to the Harris Woolen Company and moved to that part of Pomfret which became Putnam. Ballou's mill manufactured print cloths which were wholesaled through J. and P. Rhodes of Providence. Ballou's operation was substantial for its day. In addition to his stone mill, he built a store, boardinghouse, and twelve workers' tenements, as well as a house for himself. His factory employed 100 people, about evenly divided between males and females, running 4500 spindles and 112 looms. Ballou also operated a machine-building shop which in 1850 made 60 looms and 25 carding machines (perhaps meaning 25 sets of cards, or 75 machines).

The Ballou factory was not an economic success. Figures for 1850 show that costs of production exceeded the value of the output (200,000 yards of print cloth, valued at \$45,000) by almost \$1600. The depression of 1857 apparently finished off Ballou, and in the bankruptcy proceedings the mill came into the hands of Putnam resident Edward A. Cutler. Cutler also acquired a second mill nearby and for the remainder of the site's history the two were operated as one business. In 1859 Cutler bought more than \$11,000 of new machinery from the Providence Machine Company, particularly spinning frames, bringing the totals to 48 cards, 10,000 spindles, and 205 looms. Figures for 1860 show that Cutler employed 172 people and produced a somewhat cheaper grade of cloth; that year the mill's workers made 1.8 million yards of sheeting worth \$140,000, and the mill operated at a profit.

Nevertheless, Cutler had a heavy load of debt, and in 1865 he sold the mill to Benjamin R. Vaughn of Warwick, Rhode Island (Cutler had Rhode Island connections, too: in 1865 he listed his residence as Providence). The Vaughn family incorporated the Putnam Manufacturing Company that same year to take over the mill, which the company retained until 1925. Like most of Putnam's entrepreneurial class, the Vaughns were intermarried with other millowning families: George A. Vaughn, superintendant of the mill in the 1890s, was married to Blanche P. Morse, whose family had an interest at one time or another in nearly every Putnam mill.

Putnam Manufacturing Company substantially enlarged the plant and constructed about a half dozen more houses (Cutler had added no more than one or two to Ballou's original dozen). Figures for 1870 indicate that capacity had risen proportionately: 17,000 spindles and 350 looms, operated by 246 operatives (of whom 55 were children.) Output of sheeting was 3.1 million yards valued at \$312,000. The mill was said to have been only marginally profitable. Although the children were undoubtedly replaced by older workers, the number of employees never rose above 250. Improvements in machinery did boost the capacity of the mill, so that by 1892 the company was running 20,480 spindles and 402 looms.

In terms of its number of employees and its production capacity, Putnam Manufacturing was typical of the half-dozen or so medium-sized companies which together made Putnam a major textile center. Manufacturing interests were behind the movement to set Putnam off from Pomfret, and in 1855 the area was incorporated as a separate town. The spaces in between the various manufacturing villages became built-up, though even today the geography of the city reflects its origins as several mill sites. Textiles were virtually the only manufacturing activity in Putnam, though the junction of two major rail lines also aided its growth as a regional commercial center.

In the 20th century Putnam Manufacturing came into the hands of Boston-based interests. Although the company had shifted production from sheetings to more expensive lawns and sateens, and at the end was operating more than 34,000 spindles and 830 looms, the company sold out in 1925 to Edward Bloom of Paterson, New Jersey. The Bloom mill, as it came to be known, continued textile manufacture until shortly after World War II.

III. DATING OF THE MILL'S TENEMENTS

The three houses on Church Street are illustrated in the 1877 bird's-eye view of Putnam in a highly compressed form, but they are recognizable as the three structures standing there today. Moreover, the placement and footprint of the three also appear on the 1869 map, but not on the 1855 map, which shows only the houses on Ballou Street. A date of c.1865 for the two northernmost houses thus corresponds with the company's purchase of the mill and reported substantial enlargement of it, as well as with the evidence of the maps and the houses' construction details.

The dating of the southernmost house is more problematical. It is unlike the others in size, form, architectural details, and construction method, and must be presumed to pre-date the other two by several years. It is like many other small mill tenements built in the Greek Revival style in eastern Connecticut in the 1840s and early 1850s. Although it may have been built by Hosea Ballou or Edward Cutler after 1855, it is unlikely, since neither engaged in much expansion of the mill's housing. The best explanation is that this house was one of the original 1846-48 houses Ballou built at the time of his mill's construction, and that it originally stood elsewhere, probably on Ballou Street. This is consistent with its style, size, and structural system. Moreover, insurance maps of the 1880s suggest that some of the Ballou Street houses were identical to the larger units on Church Street, perhaps indicating that Putnam Manufacturing Company replaced some of the small Ballou Street houses with larger tenements. Why was this small house relocated rather than simply replaced? Perhaps because it would fit at the corner of their lot, whereas a larger tenement would not.

SIBLIOGRAPHY

LOCAL HISTORIES

- Bayles, Richard M. History of Windham County, Connecticut. New York: W.W. Preston & Co., 1889.
- Larned, Ellen D. History of Windham County, Connecticut. Worcester: Charles Hamilton, 1880.
- "Putnam Souvenir," Taylor's Home Journal [Danielsonville: William H. Taylor], Vol. II, no. 9-10 (October-December, 1894).
- Van Slyck, J.D. Representatives of New England. Manufacturers. Boston: Van Slyck & Co., 1879.
- Weaver, Margaret M. Perspectives of Putnam. Putnam: Aspinuck Historical Society, 1980.

MAPS AND VIEWS

- Bailey, O. H. View of Putnam, Conn. Boston, 1877.
- Gray, O. W. Atlas of Windham and Tolland Counties. Hartford: C.G. Keeney, 1869.
- Flynn, Thomas. Map of the City of Putnam, Connecticut. Philadelphia: D.H. Miller, 1897.
- Gerrish, E.P. et al. Map of Windham County, Connecticut, 1855. Philadelphia: E. M. Woodford, 1856.
- Sanborn Map and Publishing Company [name varies]. Insurance maps of Putnam, 1887-1945.

DIRECTORIES

- Connecticut Business Directory for the Year 1851. New Haven: J.H. Benham, 1851.
- Davison's Textile Bluebook, 1892-1923.
- Talbot, J.T. (comp.). Connecticut State Gazetteer and Business Directory for 1865 and 1866. Hartford: Case, Lockwood & Co., 1865.

Bibliography (continued):

PUBLIC RECORDS

Town of Putnam. Land Records, 1857-1925.

Town of Putnam. Tax Lists, 1856-1861.

U.S. Census Office. Censuses of Industry, 1850-1870. Manuscript schedules, microfilm, Connecticut State Library, Hartford.

PREVIOUS SURVEYS

Roth, Matthew. Connecticut: An Inventory of Historic Engineering and Industrial Sites. Washington: Society for Industrial Archeology, 1981. Historic American Engineering Record-sponsored survey.

INTERVIEWS

George LaBonte, born in 317 Church Street and resident of 313 Church Street since 1935.

